

SAÏD AMIR ARJOMAND



# AFTER KHOMEINI

IRAN UNDER HIS  
SUCCESSORS

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Iran Under His Successors

SAÏD AMIR ARJOMAND

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2009

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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Arjomand, Saïd Amir.  
After Khomeini : Iran under his successors / Saïd Amir Arjomand.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-539179-4

1. Iran—History—1979–1997.
2. Iran—History—1997–
3. Iran—Politics and government—1979–1997.
4. Iran—Politics and government—1997–
5. Iran—History—Revolution, 1979—Influence. I. Title.

DS318.9.A74 2009

955.05'43—dc22 2009012266

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

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For Kathryn

حرکت نسیم و آنگاه دلش زنده شد بر عشق

بخت است بر چرخه عالم دوام ما

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND  
TRANSLITERATION



I have closely followed the developments in Iran since my first book on contemporary Iran, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (Oxford University Press, 1988), was published over 20 years ago. I have many people and institutions to thank for being able to follow these developments, but will mention only the Ford Foundation for a 1987–1988 grant for a comparative study of revolutions, Gary Sick, who was then at the Ford Foundation and read and commented on a draft of Chapters 7 and 10 much more recently, the United States Institute for Peace for a 1992–1994 grant on linkages between domestic politics and the foreign policy of Iran, and the Carnegie Corporation for a 2006–2008 scholarship that enabled me to complete the writing of this book. I have adopted the simplest system for the transliteration of Persian words, that of the *Journal of Persianate Studies*. In the text (though not in the bibliography) diacritical marks have been omitted for proper names, however. The conventional spelling of the *New York Times* has been followed for such terms as Shi'ism and well-known names, such as Khomeini, Khamenei, and Ahmadinejad.

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## Introduction



IRAN HAS NOT CEASED TO SURPRISE THE WORLD since the American ambassador's famous "thinking the unthinkable" 1978 cable about the imminent fall of the Shah and the coming of the Islamic revolution. The apparent sequence of moderate government under President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989–1997) and democratic reform under President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) was followed by a spectacular reversal no one foresaw. The hardliners returned to capture the Majles (Iranian parliament) in the national elections of 2004, and one of their leaders, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, beat a former President (Hashemi-Rafsanjani) and two much better known reformist candidates in the presidential elections of 2005. President Ahmadinejad (2005–2009) has revived the revolutionary populism of old, now coupled with an aggressive foreign policy, including a nuclear program. Iran's political regime has proved remarkably resilient through all these changes, despite the disaffection of the younger half of the population. And the regime has become all the more robust and defiant internationally, partly as a result of the Bush administration's ill-advised bluff about regime change from 2002 onward.

The greatest misunderstanding concerning Iran after the revolution stems from the assumption that the revolution was over, either with the victory of pragmatism and Hashemi-Rafsanjani's program of economic reconstruction in 1989, following the Iran–Iraq war, or with the rise of the reform movement under Khatami in 1997. The truth is that the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah



Khomeini as the Imam and charismatic leader of the Islamic revolution in June 1989 did not mean the end of the revolution, but only the beginning of a prolonged struggle among the children of the revolution over his heritage. The raucous struggle to define, structure, and control the new Islamic political order set up by Khomeini among different factions of his followers has a logic that can be understood as the consequence of the revolution. The unique political regime produced by this struggle for Khomeini's heritage also defies understanding in generic terms, being neither a democracy nor a dictatorship. It can be easily understood, however, with reference to the distinctive and contradictory goals of the Islamic revolution.

This book draws on the sociology of revolution with a view to its long-term consequences to offer an explanation of the political development of Iran over the past two decades. Not only the vicissitudes of Iran's domestic politics, but also the shifts in its foreign policy will be shown to fit the pattern typical of the great revolutions. The unique and distinctive features of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a political regime, on the other hand, can be understood only as intended consequences of a particular revolution, the Islamic revolution of 1979, and in terms of the constitutional politics of the creation of the post-revolutionary Islamic order in Iran in the past two decades. Constitutional politics refers to the struggle for the definition of social and political order, and takes place among groups and organizations aligned behind different principles of order by their material and ideal interests. In the process of constitutional politics, the contending groups and organizations are forced to reconcile the respective logics of their principles through compromise, concession, and reinterpretation in order to translate them, more or less adequately, into an institutional order sustained by effective force.<sup>1</sup> The parameters for this struggle for the definition of the new political order—or the constitutional politics of Iran since 1989—will be shown to be those set at the beginning by Khomeini's mixture of theocratic, republican, and populist elements in the ideology of the Islamic revolution.

The two revolutions that shook the world in the first and last quarters of the twentieth century were the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the Islamic revolution in Iran. The former began in October 1917 and the latter in February 1979. But when did they respectively end? This question is much harder to answer because of the indeterminate nature of the consequences that can plausibly be attributed to each revolution. Although everyone agrees that the Bolshevik revolution did not end with the death of its charismatic leader, Lenin, there is no such consensus with respect to the Islamic revolution after the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in June 1989.

On the contrary, it will be argued that the broad lack of comprehension of the post-Khomeini revolutionary power struggle to define, structure, and control the new order he set up is partly due to the general assumption that the revolution has ended. The great enthusiasm for the movement for reform and democratization under President Khatami was also based on that assumption. This book argues that the Islamic revolution did not end with Khomeini's death and that there was no return to "normalcy" the day after. Massive revolutionary violence abated while the revolution continued. Post-revolutionary reconstruction is very much a part of the revolution. The definition of the new political order remained incomplete and was still being contested when Khomeini died in 1989, thus setting the parameters for Iran's power struggle and constitutional politics in the two decades that followed.

Like all other revolutions, the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran had historical and structural causes and preconditions, as well as more immediate sociopolitical triggers.<sup>2</sup> Such causes can help us understand only why a revolution was likely and in fact occurred in 1979. The same kind of reasoning could also explain why the revolution was destined to be an Islamic revolution, even though there were other revolutionary groups with different aims. But we need a completely different analytical framework for understanding the direction of post-revolutionary change, particularly post-revolutionary institution building and construction of a new political order. Such institution building and political reconstruction can be analyzed as the intended consequences of the revolution as they were vaguely prefigured in the ideology of the winners but realized subsequently as the result of the post-revolutionary power struggle and constitutional politics.

To shift the focus from the causes to the consequences of the revolution requires linking the conception of revolutionary processes to the long-term constitutional politics of post-revolutionary institution building. The vision of the Islamic revolution held by its leader, Khomeini, only very gradually found embodiment in the institutional and political structure of the regime it created, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). The process involved was a struggle for the definition of the new political order, and was a much longer process than the winning of the revolutionary power struggle against those groups in the original revolutionary coalition that subsequently defected, or were rejected and eliminated. The revolutionary power struggle was over by 1983, but that was almost the beginning of Khomeini's effort to translate his charisma into lasting institutions.

Institution building after the revolution and post-revolutionary developments are to a great extent determined by the subsequent transformation of the charismatic authority of the revolutionary leader. Despite the undeniable significance of charismatic leaders in the Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and Iranian revolutions, their role in the process of revolutionary transformation is largely ignored in the current theories of revolution. We therefore need to turn elsewhere in our search for an explanation. Max Weber was aware of the importance of revolutionary charismatic leadership, seeing “a highly emotional type of devotion to and trust in the leader” as “a natural basis for the utopian component which is found in all revolutions.”<sup>3</sup> To describe the return to a new pattern of normalcy after a radical historical interruption by a charismatic leader, Weber developed the idea of the routinization of charisma. Routinization was defined as the transformation of extraordinary, personal charisma at times of crisis into ordinary, lasting political institutions. From our point of view, it could be said that the failure of routinization would mean an end to the personal leadership of the revolution and abrupt shifts and reversals in post-revolutionary change. Successful routinization, on the other hand, would result in the replacement of a personal system of authority by an impersonal one, thus setting the direction of continuous post-revolutionary transformation of the political order. Successful routinization of charisma in twentieth-century revolutions has typically been a process of transition to collective rule. Khomeini as the Imam and leader of the revolution exercised his charismatic authority in the following decade to shape various revolutionary structures and institutions of the theocratic IRI, and to minimize their dissonance. In doing so, he created the present system of collective rule by clerical councils, thereby setting the parameters of Iran’s subsequent constitutional politics down to the present.

The most important parameters were set by the Constitution of 1979 and its amendment in 1989, as ordered by Khomeini shortly before his death. Constitutions can become the subject of intense public debate at the time of their promulgation or subsequent crises, and thus create a frame of reference for a variety of political groups, thereby structuring politics in ways that transcend their texts or legal effect, as has been the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran. I shall argue that the tension and contradictions among the three main principles of the 1979 Constitution—namely, theocratic government, participatory democracy, and populist social justice—account for the main features of the constitutional politics of Iran under Khomeini’s successors in their struggle over his purported revolutionary legacy.

This book accordingly begins, in chapter 1, with a sketch of Imam Khomeini's career and his leadership of Iran's Islamic revolution, and examines the attempts to institutionalize his charismatic authority as the leader of the Islamic revolution from the making of the Constitution of 1979 to his death in 1989. The regime set up by Khomeini as the Islamic Republic of Iran had a constitution crafted to Islamicize through and through its original model, the French Constitution of 1958. As a result, it came to consist of three disparate elements: theocratic or clericalist, republican or democratic, and populist on the basis of social justice. Khomeini had to solve the historically unprecedented constitutional problems of establishing a modern theocracy, and his clerical successors as Iran's ruling elite embarked on the consolidation of its novel clerical institutions and councils before all else. This important aspect of the constitutional development of the Islamic regime since 1989 is treated in chapter 2, tracing the transition from the traditional Shi'ite system of hierocratic authority to that of the new state as a theocratic republic. The emergence of the system of collective rule by clerical councils and its consolidation after Khomeini's death described in that chapter account for the most distinctive feature of the IRI and represent the institutional translation of the revolutionary vision of an Islamic polity guided by the Imam himself.

Chapter 3 describes the peaceful succession to Khomeini and the transition to dual leadership by two men who were officially designated as the Leader and the President of the IRI. Sayyad 'Ali Khamenei was elected leader by the Assembly of Leadership Experts, and Hashemi-Rafsanjani elected president. President Hashemi-Rafsanjani's attempt to centralize the revolutionary power structures and to rationalize them into a "developmental state" that revived the goals of economic development and modernization is examined, as are the limits to effective centralization. This examination of Hashemi-Rafsanjani's policy offers us an opportunity to revisit the sociology of revolution. The fact that the post-revolutionary routinization of charisma occurs within the inherited modern bureaucratic state and its legal framework has a paradoxical result. The revolutionaries aim at destroying the state but the revolution paradoxically makes the state all the stronger and increases its centralization. The paradox was first highlighted by Alexis de Tocqueville with regard to the further centralization of power in the French state by Napoleon after the great revolution of 1789. Accordingly, I call the ideal-type of revolution that captures the post-revolutionary centralization of power Tocquevillian.<sup>4</sup>

This model, however, ignores the typical emergence of post-revolutionary regimes of collective rule by councils and politbureaus. In Iran, we find this

emergence of collective rule, as well as other deviations from the unimpeded centralization highlighted in the Tocquevillian ideal-type. The distinctive features of the IRI resulted from the arrested post-revolutionary centralization of power initiated by Hashemi-Rafsanjani in the early 1990s. The typical trends toward concentration of power, both personal and institutional, were very much at work in post-revolutionary Iran, but with a distinctive inflection due to the unique constitutional position of the Supreme Jurist tailored for Imam Khomeini, on the one hand, and the reorganization of the armed forces and mobilizational militia after the war with Iraq that ended in 1988, on the other. Yet another centrifugal post-revolutionary trend, in tension with the process of centralization of power, was the emergence of economic baronies and military-foreign policy cartels that enjoy *de facto* semi-autonomy. These centrifugal tendencies account for the hydra-headed character of many post-revolutionary regimes, including that of the IRI.

The presidency of Hashemi-Rafsanjani also requires us to examine the consequences of revolution systematically. Two questions need to be reexamined: the transmutations of revolutionary radicalism and the very conception of the process of revolution. I have mentioned the widely held view that the Islamic revolution ended either in the early 1980s or in the latter part of the 1990s. The presumption that the revolution had ended was largely due to an influential but misleading model of revolutionary process called the “anatomy of revolution.”<sup>5</sup> The terminology we have available for describing different types of revolutionary groups derives from that paradigm, and is problematic because of its unaltered reference to the French revolution. More seriously misleading is the conception of the revolutionary process as a sudden convulsion in the body politic, likened to a passing fever that breaks with a return to normalcy. This conception is too restrictive to account for post-revolutionary institution building and cannot explain the relation between the revolutionary power struggle and the post-revolutionary constitutional politics.<sup>6</sup> In this paradigm, the revolution was given an extremely short lifespan of 5 years, and was said to begin with the prominence of the moderates in 1789, continue with the rise of the radicals and the reign of terror, and end with the return of the moderates in Thermidor/July 1794. The sequence identified by the anatomical metaphor has been loosely applied to the coming to power of the “moderates” in Iran at the beginning of the revolution, and again with the ascendancy of Hashemi-Rafsanjani. The Islamic revolution in Iran was seen to go through the typical cycle of the rule of the moderates (1979–1980), a subsequent takeover by the “radicals” (1981–1988), and finally

a “Thermidorian” return to more moderate rule and consolidation of the revolution at the end of the war with Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

This typical sequence, however, even in the extended and more rigorously formalized pattern,<sup>8</sup> does not allow for the examination of the institutional consequences of revolutions. The construction of a new political order, I have argued, is a longer term process and involves constitutional politics. The case of the Islamic revolution in Iran suggests that the revolutionary power struggle merges with constitutional politics and is a process that is much more drawn out, requiring a long-term perspective. Furthermore, the anatomical model obscures the identities of the historical revolutionary actors. The restorers of Thermidorian moderation are not the same persons or group as the “moderates” of the initial phase of the revolution. In this book, I will call them the “pragmatists,” best exemplified by the former President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. As distinct from the original 1979 “moderates,” they are transformed radicals. The transformation of the radicals can take different directions and proceed in different sequences. Some radicals become pragmatists, and some radicals and some pragmatists can turn to reformism as an evolution of pragmatism. The best example of the radicals becoming reformists through pragmatism is another former President, Mohammad Khatami, and the intellectuals ‘Abdolkarim Soroush and Akbar Ganji can be mentioned as examples of radicals becoming reformists directly.<sup>9</sup> There is also a further possible stage in the long-term revolutionary process: the return of revolutionary radicalism and an emergent and fairly distinct group associated with it. This possibility is fully realized in Iran under the current President, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, and with the recent rise of the group I call the “hardliners.” The hardliners are defined by their loyalty to the martyrs of the revolution and the advocacy of return to revolutionary radicalism.

Moderates, pragmatists, and hardliners in this alternative terminology can be differentiated on the basis of two criteria: the revolutionary justification of violence and the importance of ideology as a factor in revolutionary solidarity. The identities of revolutionary groups are, furthermore, not fixed but changing. As revolutions proceed, some radicals renounce the legitimacy or utility of violence and become pragmatists or reformers. Others persist in the revolutionary justification of violence and its use and become hardliners. During the June 2009 presidential election campaign, a woman confronted Mohammad ‘Atrianfar, aide to the reformist candidate and former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Musavi, with the accusation that five thousand innocent people were executed when the latter was in power in the 1980s. Atrianfar

replied, "My friend, at the beginning of the Islamic revolution we were all like Ahmadinejad, but we changed our path and our way."<sup>10</sup>

The grip of ideology on the revolutionaries may also be loosened and gradually cease to serve as the basis of revolutionary solidarity. At the beginning of the revolution, ideology unifies and motivates groups with little shared life experience. As the revolution proceeds, and is complemented by war in many cases, as in Iran, the revolutionary career and life experience of the winners become the basis of their group solidarity and identity. Some renounce ideology altogether and become pragmatists or reformists, while others assign it a secondary place as just a symbol for revolutionary solidarity, which is more solidly based on the shared life experience of revolutionary careers. This latter group of revolutionaries insists on the categorical and uncompromising loyalty to the revolution and the members become hardliners.<sup>11</sup>

The consideration of ideology in relation to shifts in group identity raises the question of the persistence and transformation of the revolutionary solidarity that has held together the IRI since its birth. The analysis, by the great Muslim historian 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), of what we would call revolutions can help us understand the persistence and change in revolutionary solidarity better than the modern theories of revolution. Ibn Khaldun discussed the emergence, persistence, and transformation of a distinct type of revolutionary solidarity among the revolutionaries who form the dominant strata of the post-revolutionary regime. The prototypical solidarity for Ibn Khaldun was the solidarity of a power group on the ascendant, which he called *'asabiyya*. This solidarity of a rising power group has an inbuilt tendency toward domination and the formation or takeover of the state by a new dynasty. When reinforced by religion (and by extension, ideology), which reinforces solidarity by instilling inner faith in the militant power group, *'asabiyya* could act as the decisive factor in political mobilization and would result in what he called great changes of dynasty and we would call revolution.<sup>12</sup> The new dynasty and its ruling class, established by revolution, remain in power for a long time, but its solidarity, produced by the crude conditions of the tribal periphery, is weakened generation after generation by civilized life. Something like this process is at work with an important segment of the first generation of Khomeini's followers who made the Islamic revolution in Iran. As revolutionary leaders emerged from the harsh conditions of clandestine cells, revolutionary committees, and militias engaged in the war with Iraq to become the ruling elite of new regime, many of them acquired power and wealth and developed a more open and pragmatic attitude.

Ibn Khaldun, however, conceived of group solidarity too narrowly as tribal solidarity based on genealogy and was primarily interested in its transformation into royal domination. His interest in revolution was incidental, and he did not examine how the original revolutionary solidarity can persist and undergo a transformation, which makes the original sense of religious mission or adherence to ideology secondary but without weakening revolutionary radicalism. In the 1940s and 1950s, Edwards Shils noted that community experience in cohesive army units in the Nazi and Soviet armies generated the intense primary group solidarity that held these armies together, whereas ideological symbols and values were effective to the extent that they were reinforced by primary group solidarity.<sup>13</sup> The Islamic revolution generated its own primary group solidarity among the Revolutionary Guards and its mobilizational arm, the Basij, and their formative experience of revolution and war with Iraq created a strong bond of loyalty and trust that sustained the present-day hardliners as they made their bid for the take-over of all non-clerical political institutions of the IRI in 2004.

As ideology receded in importance for both the pragmatists and the hardliners, it became a mere ancillary to two kinds of solidarity born of two different kinds of formative life experience. As the life experiences of the clerical ruling elite and the lay second stratum in revolutionary Iran differed significantly, the character of their solidarity evolves in different directions. The clerical solidarity of the ruling elite was the preexisting *esprit de corps* of the religious professionals produced in the *madrasas* and only later seasoned by the revolutionary struggle under their charismatic teacher, Khomeini. The revolutionary solidarity of the agitprops that formed the lay second stratum of the IRI had no comparably uniform preexisting educational and professional basis, but was steeled by the decisive experience of the decade of revolution and war into an insider, or to use the expressive Persian adjective, *khodi* (one-of-us) solidarity.

Chapters 3 and 8 discuss how the radicals and the hardliners are distinguished from the pragmatists by their firmer commitment to violence. So too are the radicals distinguishable from the pragmatists and the hardliners by a more rigid ideological commitment. The moderates, represented in the revolutionary coalition by the Provisional Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan in 1979, never reappear as a significant force in post-Khomeini Iran and are mentioned only incidentally in this book. The Islamic radicals of 1979 changed in two divergent directions, splitting into the pragmatists and the hardliners of the post-revolutionary period of consolidation. Finally, those radical children of the revolution who discarded their ideological outlook two



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